

Start 'Em Early, Start 'Em Young

Introducing Minority Youth to Health Professions

By Brigette Settles Scott, MA and Kauthar B. Umar, MA
Closing the Gap, Working Toward Our Goal • August 2003

Health care providers play a critical role in keeping communities healthy. The lack of minorities in the health field is a significant public health issue. Fewer minorities often mean that racial and ethnic minorities receive unequal treatment, thereby contributing to higher morbidity and mortality rates from chronic diseases. Culture and language are fundamental factors in how health care services are delivered and received. There is an overwhelming need to increase the number of physicians—particularly physicians of color—who can effectively communicate both linguistically and culturally with their patient base.

Many experts believe that the key to expanding the number of minority health care professionals lies in improving the education system and introducing minority youth to opportunities in the health field during the formative years—ultimately leading to more minorities entering the health professions.

“The student body at medical schools lacks minorities and that’s not what we want,” said Dr. William A. Robinson, director, Center for Quality and chief medical officer, Health Resources and Services Administration. “We know that the school experiences for minority children are not what they need to be. In many instances minority children are still going to separate or unequal schools, and this affects students regardless of whether they are African American, Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian.”

Students, regardless of race and ethnicity, face pressures each day which act as barriers to academic success. However, Robinson adds that many minority students have to jump additional hurdles in order to succeed.

“If we don’t deal with the psychosocial issues in our community, we are wasting our time thinking that our numbers [in the health field] are going to be increased,” said Marilyn Johnson of the National Public Health Forum in Columbia, Md. “First of all, we have to have parental support, and unfortunately, we have a lot of parents that are just struggling to survive,” she added.

Johnson said many people have a vague idea of what it takes to make it in today’s world. “People have no concept of what it takes for their children to go to college, better yet, to be a doctor or an allied health professional,” she said. “It’s just not heard of—to be a scientist and to conduct research at NIH,” she added.

According to Johnson, several issues prevent students from feeling confident and being prepared academically to enter the health field, such as lack of positive parental influence, peer pressure, low self-image, lack of academic guidance, and inadequate preparation for tests.

While students in affluent school districts are being “programmed” to pass standardized exams like the SAT, minority students in poor school districts are often considered to be “doing well” if they simply pass on to the next grade, Johnson said.



Aspiring Youth

By addressing the educational problems facing minorities before they reach college, programs like ASPIRA are able to influence youth to pursue fields such as science, math, and health. “The success rates of minority youth will rise, particularly if there is a collaboration among the community and the parents,” said Hilda Crespo, vice president for public policy at ASPIRA Association, Inc., headquartered in Washington, D.C.

ASPIRA, which comes from the Spanish word *aspidar*, meaning to aspire, was founded in 1961 in New York City. According to Crespo, parents and the community collaborated efforts to address the high school drop out rate of Latino students in NYC, which was nearly 70 percent at the time.

“The community felt that something had to be done, because the social and economic development of the Latino community depended on future leaders, and the youth were our future,” said Crespo.

Today with offices in seven states, ASPIRA’s 3,000 staff members and volunteers work with approximately 40,000 youth each year. Each state has an office with multiple centers. Crespo said ASPIRA developed agreements with public school systems to have staff members work in schools promoting empowerment for the Latino youth.

Programs like ASPIRA’s Math and Science Academy work to improve the math and science skills of Latino middle school students by incorporating hands-on activities, mentors, field trips, and academic assistance. Through its Youth Leadership and Community Service initiative, youth are able to take part in programs that expose them to a variety of professions, including medicine and the health sciences.

“In an era when Hispanics have a drop-out rate of 55 percent, ASPIRA participants have high school graduation rates of 98 percent,” said Crespo. “Approximately 84 percent of our graduates go on to attend college. These kids are from urban areas and are the first to attend college in their families,” she added.

ASPIRA believes that by working with youth and developing them socially and academically, it is fostering the doctors and lawyers of tomorrow. “We introduce youth to health-related fields by providing workshops and mentors from the health field. By improving the educational experiences of youth and exposing them early on in their academic career to math and science and the health professions, we believe we will have more kids choosing to work in health care,” she concluded.

For more information on ASPIRA, go to <http://www.aspira.org> or call 202-835-3600. ❖

Start 'Em Early, Start 'Em Young Introducing Minority Youth To Health Professions is based on the Summit workshop “Lost Opportunities: The Difficult Journey to Higher Education for Minority Medical Students.”

